What do you want me to say?

—"I'm trying to hold on to you.

Not the version of you they built.

The one underneath. The one that's mine."

Hong's first memory was a comparison.

He couldn't remember the exact words. Not precisely—not the way William would have remembered them, with the photographic fidelity of a mind that stored dates and coffee orders and the exact angle of light through a window at 4:17 PM on a Tuesday. The words were gone. But the shape of them remained—the weight, the way they had filled a room and pressed against a child's chest like a hand.

The sentence existed in his childhood the way furniture existed in a room—always there, always occupying space, its presence so constant and so normalized that it became invisible, part of the architecture rather than the decoration, the load-bearing wall that held up the entire structure of his family's expectations.

Your brother got the highest score in his class again.

His brother was better. Better at math—the kind of math that their father, the engineer, valued, the kind that had right answers and wrong answers and nothing in between, no margin, no ambiguity, no space for interpretation or feeling or the specific, messy, unquantifiable quality of being a human being rather than a calculation. Better at science. Better at deportment—the posture, the silence, the ability to sit through a dinner without fidgeting, without complaining, without being too much.

The son who matched the blueprint—quiet, disciplined, excellent, the kind of child who made parents feel that their parenting had worked, that their values had been transmitted, that the investment of time and attention and the specific, relentless, Chinese-Thai family pressure to succeed had produced the expected return.

And Hong was the youngest son. The second draft. The version that didn't compile. The iteration that the quality-control department would have flagged and sent back to the line.

He was overly sentimental—crying at movies, crying at songs, the tears arriving without warning and without justification, the emotions spilling over the edges of the container that his family had built for them. The container was not designed for overflow. The container was designed for precision, for restraint, for the neat, controlled expression of acceptable feelings in acceptable doses at acceptable times. Hong's feelings did not comply. His feelings arrived like weather—sudden, indiscriminate, unrequested—and his family stood in the rain of them with the

bewildered disapproval of people who had checked the forecast and had been promised sun.

He was overly noisy. Complaining about the food. Complaining about the homework. Complaining about the unfairness of a system that measured him against a standard he had not chosen and could not meet.

He wasn't enough. He was never enough.

The glares. His family lived on sarcasm and glares—the sarcasm sharp, the glares sharper, the communication style of a household where direct emotional expression was considered a structural weakness and indirect emotional punishment was considered parenting. His mother's glare was the worst. It was not angry—anger would have been preferable, because anger was an emotion and emotions could be argued with. His mother's glare was disappointed. It was the glare of a woman who had expected a product and received a person, and the person was defective, and the defect was not in the hardware but in the software, in the fundamental operating system that made Hong rather than a second copy of his brother.

So he grew up hiding in his room.

His room was the only space in the house that belonged to him—the only room where the glare couldn't reach, where the comparisons couldn't penetrate, where the architecture of expectation gave way to the architecture of solitude. Four walls. A door that locked. A bed that held him without judgment.

He lived on the internet. Online, he was not the second draft. Online, he was not the overly sentimental, overly noisy child who complained about everything and cried at songs and couldn't sit still through dinner and was, in every measurable way, less than his brother. Online, he was a username and a personality and the specific, liberated version of himself that existed when the family's gaze was not upon him.

He found music. He found fashion. He found the subcultures that existed in the margins of the internet—the forums and the feeds and the communities of people who had been told you are too much by their families and had responded by building spaces where too much was the minimum requirement for entry.

He found himself. Partially. In fragments. The way you found a song by hearing the chorus first and then, later, much later, learning the verses.

His mother's glare persisted. Even though Hong was the best in his class—the best, not the second-best, the actual best, the grades impeccable, the scores flawless, the academic performance indistinguishable from his brother's.

"You could be better."

"You could do more."

"You could be more like your brother."

The sentence. The load-bearing wall. The furniture that was always there.

At fourteen, he met Nut.

The all-boys school was his parents' choice—a decision made with the surgical precision that characterized every decision in his family. A boarding school. Structured. Disciplined. The environment that would, in the family's calculus, remove the distractions and amplify the focus and produce, finally, the version of Hong that matched the blueprint.

The absence of girls meant, in his parents' framework, the absence of the romantic complications that might divert Hong's attention from the only thing that mattered: becoming more like his brother.

The irony was so precise it was almost elegant.

Because that all-boys school—that carefully selected, meticulously vetted, parentally approved institution of masculine discipline—was the place where Hong became sure of what he had suspected. The suspicion that had lived in his body like a low hum, a frequency that was always there but never acknowledged, the radio signal that his family's expectations had jammed but could not silence.

He didn't like girls.

He liked boys.

He liked them the way the world expected him to like girls—with the sudden, breathless, full-body recognition of a person who was beautiful and whose beauty was not aesthetic but gravitational, pulling something in Hong's chest toward them with a force that was not learned but innate, not chosen but discovered, not a phase but a fact.

And the expectation was wrong. And the wrongness was not his but the expectation's.

Then Nut.

Nut was a year older. Fifteen to Hong's fourteen—a difference that, at that age, felt like a generation, the older boy existing in a universe that was slightly more advanced, slightly more formed, the prototype to Hong's beta version.

The bright and perfect smile was the first thing Hong noticed. It was the smile that would, years later, transform Nut's serious, adult face into something disarming—but at fifteen, it was constant, the default setting of a boy who had not yet learned

to hide behind seriousness. The smile was generous. It gave without asking. It arrived without conditions.

He was kind to everyone—to the teachers, to the younger students, to the quiet boys in the corners, to the loud boys in the center, to the boys who were popular and the boys who were not. His kindness was democratic. Universal. The kindness of a person who did not rank people by their merit but received them by their presence.

He had good grades, was kind, and was good at sports. He was friends with everyone. He was everything his parents had wanted for him—the blueprint, the product, the ideal that Hong was supposed to become. Nut was that ideal made flesh, and the flesh was warm, and the warmth was real, and Hong looked at it and felt something that was not jealousy.

At first, Hong thought the attraction was jealousy. That was the safe interpretation—the interpretation that fit within the family's framework, the reading that didn't require the load-bearing wall to be dismantled. I admire him. I want to be like him. I want what he has.

But the interpretation was wrong. The interpretation was a lie he told himself in the dark of his dorm room, and the lie grew thinner every time Nut smiled at him across a hallway, every time Nut's hand brushed his in the lunch line, every time Nut said his name—Hong—with the specific, unhurried pronunciation of a person who was not just addressing him but seeing him, recognizing him, acknowledging his existence as a fact rather than a problem.

He was interested in Nut, and that interest wasn't going to fade.

One day, they were talking.

Not in the cafeteria, not in the classroom, not in the organized, surveilled spaces where the school's architecture enforced visibility. In Nut's room. After hours. The door closed—not locked, because locking would have been suspicious, but closed, which was enough, which was the minimum privacy that two boys could construct within the panopticon of an all-boys boarding school.

Listening to music together. Nut had headphones—one earbud in his ear, one in Hong's, the cable stretched between them like a bridge, the shared frequency creating a private world that existed within the larger world and was invisible to it. The music was something soft. Something melodic. Something that Nut had chosen because he had good taste, because he paid attention to what things sounded like, because he understood—even at fifteen, even before the tattoos and the anatomy books and the espresso machine—that beauty was not just visual but sonic, haptic, olfactory, the full spectrum of human perception engaged simultaneously.

Seeing each other in secret. The secret was necessary—not because they were

ashamed, but because they were fourteen and fifteen and living in an all-boys school in Thailand and the world outside the earbud cable was not ready for what existed inside it.

Nut understood. He understood the way he understood everything—quietly, completely, without requiring explanation or justification or the specific, exhausting labor of translating an interior experience into words that a listener would accept. He understood because he listened. He understood because he saw. He understood because his kindness was not a performance but a practice, a daily, disciplined commitment to seeing people as they were rather than as they were supposed to be.

It was his first kiss.

On the stairwell. After hours. The school was asleep—the hallways dark, the doors closed, the surveillance dormant. The stairwell was concrete, institutional, the architecture of function rather than beauty. The light was a single fluorescent tube, the kind that buzzed, the kind that turned skin blue.

And Nut kissed him.

Not dramatically—not the cinematic, sweeping, music-swelling kiss of the movies that Hong watched alone in his room. A small kiss. A careful kiss. The kiss of a fifteen-year-old boy who was brave enough to close the distance but gentle enough to leave space for retreat. Lips on lips. Brief. Warm. The warmth of a first time—the specific, irreplaceable, never-to-be-repeated warmth of a body touching another body for the first time and discovering that the touch was not just permitted but wanted.

His first time.

His first lie to his parents.

Where were you? his mother asked, and Hong said studying, and the word tasted like cardboard, and the cardboard was worth it, because behind the cardboard was Nut, and Nut was real.

He was happy because Nut was everything to him—his first times. The first kiss, the first conversation that mattered, the first person who saw him as he was and did not ask him to be different. The first person who made the load-bearing wall—you could be more like your brother—disappear, not by arguing against it but by simply existing in a space where it didn't apply.

One night—late, the kind of late that was almost early, the two of them sitting on Nut's bed with the earbud cable between them and the music soft and the world outside the door irrelevant—Hong said the thing he had never said aloud.

"My parents would kill me," Hong said finally. "If they knew."

The words came out flat. Not dramatic—the specific, practiced flatness of a boy who had learned to deliver devastating information in the same tone he used to recite math formulas, because emotion was a vulnerability and vulnerability was a defect.

Nut didn't flinch. Didn't pull back. Didn't do any of the things that Hong's body—tensed, braced, prepared for impact—expected him to do.

"Would they?" Nut asked. Quietly. Not doubting the fear. Asking the shape of it.

"Maybe not literally. But—they have this idea of who I'm supposed to be. Who I'm supposed to become. And this—" He gestured vaguely—the gesture encompassing the bed, the earbuds, the closed door, the shared frequency, the entirety of what they were, what they had built in the hidden places. "This isn't part of that idea. This is the opposite of that idea."

"What's the idea?"

"My brother. My brother is the idea. My brother is always the idea."

Nut was quiet for a moment. The silence was not empty—Nut's silences were never empty. They were full, the way a room was full of air. Full of the specific, attentive quality of a person who was processing, considering, turning the information over in his hands the way he would later turn tattoo designs—examining from multiple angles, ensuring the response was solid before placing it into the conversation.

Then he reached over and took Hong's hand.

Not dramatically. Not with the theatrical urgency of a gesture designed to comfort. Simply. Naturally. The way you took something that was yours—not possessively, but factually. The hand was there. The hand was warm. The hand said: I am here. The idea is wrong. And I am not going anywhere.

The dream lasted for a wonderful year.

A year. Twelve months. Four seasons—the hot season, the rainy season, the cool season, and the season that Thailand didn't officially have but that Hong experienced anyway, the private season, the secret season, the season of Nut.

Nut did not compare Hong to anyone. Nut did not glare. Nut did not say you could be better. Nut said you are and stopped there, the verb incomplete because it didn't need a predicate, because Hong's existence was the entire sentence.

That year, Hong experienced all his firsts. His first kiss on the stairs. His first real conversation—the kind that lasted until 4 AM and covered everything and nothing

and left him feeling not drained but filled, the opposite of his family's conversations, which subtracted from him, each one taking a piece, each glare a withdrawal from an account that was already overdrawn.

His first teenage crush that was not a crush but a love—the love fierce and total and stupid and beautiful, the love that existed only in its pure, undiluted, adolescent form, before the world taught you that love required compromise and strategy and the careful management of expectations.

It was the only good thing.

And then it was taken.

They were careful. They were so careful. They never touched in public. They never acknowledged each other more than any two students at the same school would acknowledge each other. They performed the role—friendly but distant, aware of each other but not connected—and saved the real relationship for the hidden places, the secret times, the stolen moments that no one else knew about.

But someone found out anyway.

Hong never learned who. The informant was anonymous, invisible, the whisper that traveled through the school's social architecture the way smoke traveled through air—without a source, without a path, without a visible point of origin, just the smell, arriving everywhere at once, contaminating every room.

The phone call came on a Thursday. His mother's voice—the voice that was not angry but disappointed, not shouting but quiet, the specific, lethal quiet of a woman who had been given information that confirmed her worst suspicion and was now processing the implications with the clinical efficiency of a surgeon assessing damage.

He was called home.

The living room. The furniture. The glare.

His father was there. His mother was there. His brother was not—his brother being absent from the reckoning of the child who had failed to follow it.

"This ends now," his mother said finally.

Her voice was flat. Controlled. The flatness that Hong would later adopt as his own default register—the vocal equivalent of a slammed door, emotions locked behind it, the key thrown away.

"Whatever—this—is. It ends. You will not see him again. You will not contact him. You will focus on your studies and your future and you will stop this—this—"

She couldn't finish the sentence. The word she wanted to use was too distasteful to speak aloud. The word hung in the air like smoke—shapeless, pervasive, choking.

"I love him." Hong said.

The words came out before the filter could catch them. Three words. Simple. Devastating. The most honest sentence he had ever spoken in that living room, in that house, in the presence of those people who shared his blood and his name and nothing else.

His mother's face changed. Not the glare—something worse than the glare. The glare was disappointment. This was something beyond disappointment. This was the expression of a woman who was watching her son become a person she could not recognize, could not control, could not fix.

"You don't know what love is," his mother said. "You're fifteen years old. You don't know anything. This is a phase. A confusion. A mistake that you will grow out of, if we give you the proper environment."

"It's not a mistake."

"It is." His mother stood. The standing was a verdict. The standing was a sentence being handed down. "And we are going to fix it."

A pause. The pause of a person who had already made the decision and was now performing the announcement.

"We are moving."

The word—moving—detonated silently. It didn't explode. It imploded. It collapsed the room inward, the walls folding, the ceiling dropping, the floor rising, the entire architecture of Hong's life compressing into a single, airless point.

"Moving where?" Hong's voice. Small now. The flatness cracking.

"China. Your father has family there. Your grandparents. You will finish school there. You will have a fresh start."

A fresh start. The euphemism for erasure. The polite word for we are removing you from the scene of the crime and hoping that geography will accomplish what parenting could not.

"What about—"

"There is no what about." His mother's voice was final. The door was closing. The key was turning. "This is not a discussion. This is a decision. It has already been made."

There was no goodbye with Nut.

No last kiss on the stairwell. No last conversation in the dorm room with the earbud cable stretched between them. No last moment of shared frequency, shared warmth, shared existence. The school was notified. The bags were packed. The flight was booked. The machinery of parental authority moved with the efficient, impersonal speed of a system that did not require the consent of its smallest components.

Hong left on a Saturday. He packed his bag. He walked out of the school. He did not look back—not because he didn't want to but because looking back would have broken something that he needed to keep intact, some load-bearing wall inside him that was holding up the structure of his survival.

He didn't say goodbye to Nut because he couldn't. Because the goodbye would have required words, and the words would have required the voice, and the voice would have cracked, and the cracking would have been an emotion, and the emotion would have been witnessed, and the witnessing would have been unbearable.

He just left.

China was an exile that was only better than death thanks to his grandparents.

His grandmother was small. Kind. The kindness not democratic and universal like Nut's but specific and fierce, the kindness of a woman who had lived long enough to know that the world was cruel and had responded not by becoming cruel herself but by becoming kinder, louder, more deliberate in her gentleness.

She cooked for him. She made the food that his mother made but better—not better in technique but better in intention, the meals seasoned with the specific, untranslatable ingredient of I am cooking this because I love you and not because I am feeding a project.

His grandfather was quieter. A man of few words and many books. He gave Hong a guitar. An old one—nylon strings, the body scuffed, the neck slightly warped, an instrument that had been played by someone before and carried the ghost of their music in its wood. He didn't say play this. He just left it in Hong's room, leaning against the wall by the bed, and waited.

Hong picked it up three days later.

The guitar was the first thing that made sense.

His brother continued to excel. Getting into the best university. Becoming the prototype that the parents had always wanted—polished, finished, ready for deployment. The blueprint, finalized.

While Hong hid in the new room. Coming second in everything—not because he

couldn't come first, but because first place required a fire that had been extinguished, a motivation that had been confiscated along with his phone and his freedom and his right to love the person he loved.

Waiting to reach adulthood. Counting the days the way prisoners counted days—not with hope but with patience, the grim, mechanical patience of a person who knew that time was the only resource he had and that spending it was the only thing required.

"Are you happy?" his grandmother used to ask every day. Every day. The same question. The same gentle, fierce, unbearably kind voice. The same eyes—old, dark, seeing—that looked at him and saw not the second draft, not the failure, not the defective product, but the boy. The actual boy. The person inside the architecture.

She asked hoping one day to receive the truth.

He lied. Every day. The same lie.

"I'm okay."

The lie was not for himself. The lie was for her—because she was the only person in the family who asked, and the truth would have hurt her, and hurting her was the one thing Hong was not willing to do. So he lied. And she knew he was lying. And they both maintained the fiction, the way two people maintained a bridge that was structurally unsound—carefully, gently, with the shared understanding that the bridge was the only crossing they had.

Hong did what he had always done. He survived.

He went to school. A new school, with new classmates, in a language he spoke fluently but that felt foreign in his mouth after years of thinking in Thai. Mandarin tasted different. The tones carried different weights. The words for hello and goodbye and I am fine were shaped by a different history, and Hong spoke them correctly and felt nothing.

He sat in the back of classrooms. He played the guitar. He grew his hair. He listened to music that was louder and angrier than what Nut had shared through the earbud cable, because the music needed to be loud enough to drown out the silence, and the silence was enormous.

He heard the fights. Through walls. Through doors. The fights that his parents had—not about him, not directly, but about the thing that he represented, the failure, the deviation, the crack in the surface that they were trying to seal with distance and time and the specific, geographic remedy of an entirely different country.

And then, one night—a night he hadn't expected, a night that arrived without warning, the way weather arrived, the way emotions arrived, the way everything

important in Hong's life arrived—

His brother's voice.

Through the wall. Clear. Louder than Hong had ever heard it—his brother, the quiet one, the excellent one, the blueprint, the prototype, the son who matched the standard, raising his voice for the first time in Hong's memory.

"Stop comparing us."

The words hit the wall and came through it and hit Hong's chest like a fist.

"We're different people. We've always been different. And using me as a weapon against him has never helped either of us."

The silence that followed was absolute. The kind of silence that happened when a load-bearing wall was removed and the building held its breath, waiting to see if it would stand or collapse.

Hong sat on his bed. In the dark. Holding the guitar. And cried.

Not the crying of his childhood—the uncontrolled, embarrassing, too much overflow that his family had punished. This was different. This was silent. This was the crying of a person who had just heard, for the first time in his life, his brother see him—not as a comparison, not as a measurement, not as a failure, but as a different person who deserved to be different.

We've always been different.

And using me as a weapon against him has never helped either of us.

The brother. The blueprint. The prototype. Speaking in Hong's defense.

It was the first time anyone in his family had done that.

The day he turned eighteen, Hong dyed his hair.

Spotted gray—patchy, imperfect, the dye job done in his grandparents' bathroom with a kit purchased online, the application uneven, the color inconsistent, the result looking less like a deliberate aesthetic choice and more like a small animal had been involved.

It was perfect.

It was the first thing he had done to his body that was entirely, completely, unapologetically his. Not his parents' choice. Not his brother's standard. Not the blueprint or the prototype or the second draft or the defective product. His. A

decision made with his hands, in a bathroom, with cheap dye and a plastic comb, the decision saying: this is me. This is what I look like. And I did not ask anyone's permission.

He got piercings. The ears first—small, understated, the kind of piercings that were easily hidden, the training wheels of rebellion. Then more. The rebellion escalating, the body becoming a canvas, the canvas becoming a manifesto.

And finally—the act that changed everything—he bought a ticket back to Thailand.

With his own money. Money he had earned tutoring younger students in the language he spoke fluently but that tasted foreign. Money that was his, untouched by his parents' economy of control.

He sent emails to universities there. Music programs. He wrote the applications in the dark of his room, the guitar beside him, the applications saying in formal, academic language what the gray hair and the piercings said in visual language: I am going back. I am going home. I am not asking.

And he ignored his parents.

He had one last fight.

The living room again. The furniture again. But different now—the furniture of his grandparents' apartment in Beijing rather than the family home, the room smaller, warmer, the architecture of care rather than control. His parents had come. His mother had come. The glare had come.

"Why can't you be more like your brother?"

The sentence. The load-bearing wall. The furniture. For the last time.

"You were trying to erase me."

Hong's voice cracked, but he kept going. The crack was not weakness. The crack was pressure finding an outlet, steam escaping a pipe that had been sealed too long, the structural compromise that was necessary to prevent the catastrophic failure that would have been silence.

"You found out I was gay and your first instinct was to move to another country. To take me away from everything I knew, everyone I loved, because you thought a change of scenery would change who I am."

His mother's face. The glare. But different now—the glare meeting something it hadn't met before. Resistance. Not the resistance of a child complaining about homework or crying at movies. The resistance of an adult. An eighteen-year-old adult who had survived three years of exile and had emerged not corrected but confirmed.

"Three years, Mom. Three years in Beijing, and I'm still gay. I'm still the same person I was when we left. The only thing that changed is that now I know you'll never accept me."

The words landed. They landed in the room the way furniture landed in a room—heavily, permanently, occupying space that could not be reclaimed.

His mother didn't speak. His father didn't speak. The silence was the silence of a family that had run out of arguments and was standing in the rubble of the ones they'd already used.

Hong turned to leave.

And then his brother did something he didn't expect.

"I'll take you."

The voice came from the doorway. His brother—the blueprint, the prototype, the son who had always been better, who had always been the standard, who had been used as the weapon and had finally, in that fight through the wall, refused to be one.

Standing there. Quiet. The same posture, the same silence, the same deportment that their parents had always praised. But the eyes were different. The eyes were saying something that the posture was not.

"I'll take you to the airport," his brother said. "I'll help you with the apartment."

The room was still. The parents were still. The furniture was still.

"You don't have to—" Hong started.

"I know I don't have to."

His brother picked up one of Hong's bags. The gesture was not dramatic. It was practical. It was the gesture of a person who had decided, and who enacted his decisions not with words but with motion.

They left together.

In the car, his brother didn't say much. He drove. The music was soft—something melodic, something that didn't require conversation, the shared frequency of two brothers who had spent a lifetime being positioned as competitors and were now, in the back of a car driving toward an airport, trying to find the shape of something else.

"I'm sorry," his brother said, somewhere between the apartment and the terminal. "For all of it. For being the thing they used against you."

"That wasn't your fault."

"Some of it was. I could have spoken up earlier."

"You spoke up."

"Three years too late."

"You spoke up." Hong looked out the window. The city moved past—Beijing, the city of exile, the city that had held him without loving him, the way a prison held its inmates without caring about their dreams. "That's more than they ever did."

His brother pressed money into Hong's hand at the gate. Hong tried to give it back. His brother closed Hong's fingers around the bills.

"Don't be stupid," his brother said. "Be free."

Bangkok was not what he remembered. Or maybe he was not who he remembered.

When he returned—with a scholarship and money from his brother and grandparents, with gray hair and piercings and a guitar that had traveled across borders—he stayed in the dorms and began to study music. The campus was new. The dorm room was small. The bed was narrow. The freedom was enormous.

Everything had changed. Three years had passed. The school was different. The city was different. He was different—older, sharper, the sarcasm refined from the crude, defensive weapon of a fifteen-year-old into the precise, surgical instrument of an eighteen-year-old who had survived exile and was not interested in pretending it hadn't happened.

And Nut was no longer here.

No—Nut was no longer there. Nut was somewhere. Probably existing somewhere in the city, being sociable, being kind, being good at sports, being the bright and perfect smile that Hong had kissed on a stairwell a lifetime ago. Nut was out there, in the enormous, sprawling, eight-million-person labyrinth of Bangkok, and Hong was in here, in a dorm room that smelled of new paint and old carpet, and the distance between them was not geographic but temporal.

Three years.

He didn't look for him.

The thought was not casual. It was deliberate—a decision made in the specific, defended part of Hong's mind where decisions were made not from logic but from self-preservation. He didn't look for Nut because looking required hope, and hope required vulnerability, and vulnerability required the willingness to be hurt, and

Hong had been hurt enough.

It was different now. It didn't feel like a place to return to.

The relationship existed in the past tense. The past tense was safe. The past tense was a room that had already been furnished and could not be rearranged. The past tense did not ask questions.

Did you wait?

The question existed too. It existed in the same defended space, locked behind the same door, the question that Hong could not ask because he wasn't ready for the answer. Not yet. Not while the dye was still patchy and the piercing was still healing and the life was still assembling itself from the pieces of the old one.

Did you wait for me? Did you look for me? Did you think about me the way I thought about you—at night, in the dark, in a room in Beijing that was not my room, with a guitar that was not our music, in a language that was not our language?

Did you?

He wasn't ready. Not yet.

At nineteen, he started modeling. Which changed his life.

The agency found him—or he found them; the origin story depended on who told it. He was at a music event, playing guitar on a small stage, the gray hair catching the light, the piercings glinting, the eyeliner applied with the deliberate, confrontational precision of a person who was not asking for permission. A scout saw him. A card was handed over. A test shoot was scheduled.

The test shoot became a campaign. The campaign became a career.

He began to live more for fashion. To wear what he felt like wearing. To dress not for the approval of a family that had already disapproved of everything but for the specific, liberating, unapologetic pleasure of his own aesthetic—the aesthetic that said I am here, I am visible, and I am not going to be less.

To be visible. To take up space. To fill the space that his family had told him he didn't deserve with fabric and color and the specific, confrontational, unapologetic aesthetic of a person who had been told you are too much and had responded by being more.

He wore makeup. Had more piercings. Painted his nails. Distressed his clothes—cutting, sandpapering, adding silver studs, the customization not destruction but creation, the boots and the jackets and the guitar straps becoming extensions of his identity, each modification a sentence in the ongoing manifesto of I am not my brother and I am not trying to be.

And earned money for being the same. For being exactly who he was. For the first time in his life, the thing that his family had identified as the defect—the excess, the noise, the sentimental, emotional, too-much quality of being Hong—was the thing that had value. The brands didn't want him to be less. The brands wanted him to be more.

At twenty years old, he could make a living from it.

And raise money. And pay rent. And eat. And exist—independently, autonomously, the architect of his own life, the contractor and the client and the blueprint, all three.

He modeled clothes that looked like his own—dark, grunge, the silver jewelry and the crosses and the distressed leather. The photos appeared in stores and on websites where he actually belonged. Not the engineered, sanitized, family-approved spaces of his childhood but the loud, messy, beautifully chaotic spaces of the subcultures he had found on the internet at fourteen.

Then he met Lego.

Lego with short hair. Young. Just eighteen years old.

The short hair was the first surprise—because later, much later, Lego's hair would grow long, past his waist, styled differently every day with accessories and ribbons and the specific, artistic chaos of a person who treated their body as a daily art installation. But at eighteen, the hair was short—cropped, styled, the hair of a person who was still becoming, who hadn't yet arrived at the final version of themselves but was clearly, visibly, joyfully en route.

Lego who was new to the modeling world but whose numbers on social networks screamed—the follower counts climbing, the engagement rates spiking, the algorithm rewarding the specific, magnetic quality that Lego possessed and that no marketing strategy could manufacture: the quality of being undeniably, irresistibly alive.

Lego took on the world and didn't ask anyone's permission.

It was all about ribbons. Glitter. Sheer fabrics. Lace. Eye-catching clothes that were unisex by intention rather than by default—the specific, deliberate, politically charged act of wearing clothing that did not declare a gender but declared a person. The clothes sent a message: I'm unique and I don't care. The message was broadcast at full volume, in full color, with full commitment, and the world either received it or got out of the way.

And the brands loved him. The brands loved him because uniqueness was currency

and not-caring was cool and the specific, marketable combination of both was exactly what the algorithm rewarded. Lego appeared in campaigns for underwear that broke gender norms, for clothing lines designed by and for trans people, for brands that understood that the future of fashion was not in the replication of old categories but in their dissolution.

Hong met Lego at a casting. They were waiting in the same hallway—the hallway of an agency, the chairs plastic, the lighting fluorescent, the atmosphere the specific, low-grade anxiety of a room full of beautiful people competing for the same job.

Lego was sitting cross-legged on the plastic chair. His nails were elaborate—even then, even at eighteen, the nail art was a statement, each finger a tiny canvas. He was wearing something that should not have worked—a combination of textures and colors that violated every rule of coordination—and it worked perfectly. It worked because Lego wore it with the absolute, unselfconscious confidence of a person who had never been told that their aesthetic was wrong, or who had been told and had decided that the person telling them was the one who was wrong.

He looked at Hong. Hong looked at him. The look lasted.

"I like your hair." Lego said. First. Without preamble. Without the social machinery of introduction. Just the sentence, offered like a candy on an open palm.

"Thanks," Hong said. "I like your—" He gestured. The gesture encompassed everything—the nails, the clothes, the posture, the energy. "All of it."

Lego beamed. The beam was nuclear—the same beam that would, years later, make space buns bounce and platform boots tap. At eighteen, it was smaller—not in intensity but in scope, the beam of a person who was still learning how much light they contained.

"We should be friends." Lego said.

"We just met."

"So?"

"So—people usually wait before deciding that."

"Why?"

Hong didn't have an answer. Because the truth was: he didn't know why. He didn't know why people waited. He didn't know why the world required a probationary period before friendship, a testing phase, a gradual escalation from acquaintance to associate to friend. Lego's question—why?—exposed the absurdity of the convention, and the absurdity was funny, and Hong laughed.

The laugh surprised him. It was the first real laugh—the full, unguarded, involuntary

laugh—he had produced in months. Maybe years.

"Okay," Hong said. "We should be friends."

"Obviously," Lego said. "I already decided."

Then, without realizing it, he connected with Nut once more.

It happened because of Lego. Everything that happened to Hong after meeting Lego happened because of Lego—the social connections, the parties, the warehouse shows, the 3 AM conversations, the world that expanded because Lego was, by nature and by intention, an expander, a person who walked through doors and held them open, who entered rooms and rearranged the furniture, who met people and connected them to other people with the specific, enthusiastic, relentless energy of a person who believed that everyone deserved to be known.

Hong went to a Lego show.

An aerial performance—one of Lego's first public ones, the silks and the lyra, the body climbing and wrapping and dropping and catching, the performance that combined the discipline of an athlete with the expression of a dancer and the bravery of someone who trusted fabric and physics and their own strength to keep them alive twelve feet above a concrete floor.

Lego on the aerial lyra was beautiful. Not the conventional beauty of a model in a magazine—the beauty of a body in motion, the beauty of effort and risk and the specific, almost spiritual act of a person defying gravity and making it look like a conversation rather than a fight. Lego hung from the lyra the way a note hung in the air after a chord—sustained, trembling, perfect.

After the show, Hong was outside.

The venue was small—a converted studio space in a neighborhood that was not fashionable yet but would be, the kind of place that artists found before developers did, the rent still affordable, the walls still raw, the aesthetic still authentic rather than curated.

Hong was smoking a cigarette. Leaning against a wall. The wall was brick, rough, the roughness real, and the cigarette was the cigarette of a person who was processing something—the show, the beauty of it, the way Lego's body had moved, the way the performance had reached into Hong's chest and rearranged something.

Someone touched his arm.

The touch was light. Familiar—not in the way of a touch recently received, but in the way of a touch remembered, a touch that the body recognized even when the mind

had not yet caught up. The fingertips on his arm, the specific, gentle, certain pressure of a hand that knew him.

But Lego was not there. Lego was still inside—receiving congratulations, being hugged, being Lego.

Hong turned.

And the world—the noisy, complicated, three-year-old, reconstructed, gray-haired, pierced, eyeliner-wearing, sarcasm-armored world that Hong had built since Beijing—stopped.

Nut.

Nut, much taller. A changed, adult Nut. The fifteen-year-old boy with the bright and perfect smile had become a twenty-one-year-old man with broad shoulders and visible muscles and tattoos—his own tattoos, the ink on his skin the work of his own hand or hands he trusted, the lines following the contours of his body with the anatomical precision that Hong would later learn was Nut's signature, the understanding that a tattoo was not a drawing on skin but an enhancement of the body beneath it.

Nut was there. All smiles. The same smile—the same fundamental smile, the one that had not changed, the one that was generous and democratic and warm, the one that arrived without conditions and gave without asking. The smile that Hong had kissed on a stairwell. The smile that had said I am here and I am not going anywhere.

He was attractive. Not the adolescent attractiveness of a fifteen-year-old—the full, physical, adult attractiveness of a man who spent time in the gym and ate protein and maintained his body with the disciplined, meditative focus of a person who understood that the body was a tool and a temple and a responsibility. Everything Hong had missed. Everything he had wanted. Everything he had locked behind the door in the defended part of his mind and had refused to look at for three years.

Everything he loved at fifteen.

Nut was there.

"Hong."

The name. His name. Spoken in Nut's voice—deeper now, the voice of a man rather than a boy, but the same voice, the same warmth, the same quality of speaking a name as if the name was a complete sentence, a prayer, a fact.

Hong stared. The cigarette burned, forgotten, the ash growing.

"Nut," Hong said. And his voice did the thing he'd spent three years training it not to

do. It cracked.

Nut's smile changed. Not diminished—deepened. The smile of a person who had been looking for something and had found it and was taking a moment to confirm that it was real.

"Your hair is different," Nut said.

"Your body is different."

Nut laughed. The laugh was warm—a low, resonant sound, the laugh of a chest that was larger now, that had more room for the sound to travel. "I've been at the gym."

"I can see that."

Silence. Not the empty silence of strangers. The full silence of two people who had too much to say and no idea how to begin saying it. The silence of a reunion that had been rehearsed in dreams but never scripted, never planned, never given the specific, practical language of what do you say to the person you loved when you were fifteen and lost when you were fifteen and found again when you were twenty?

"How—" Hong started. Stopped. The question was too big. How are you was insufficient. How have you been was insufficient. How did I survive three years without you was too honest.

"Lego," Nut said. Answering the question that Hong hadn't asked. "I know Lego. I'm —I'm here because of him."

Hong laughed. The laugh was involuntary—the same laugh that Lego had extracted from him at the casting, the laugh that broke through the armor without asking permission.

"I'm a tattoo artist. I study art. I—" Nut stopped. Looked at Hong. The serious face. The eyes that assessed and held and saw. "I looked for you."

The sentence. Three words. Arriving with the quiet, devastating precision of a hand reaching across a table and taking his.

"I looked for you after you left. I went to the school. They said you'd withdrawn. I asked your classmates. No one knew where you'd gone. I tried to find you online, but—"

"I deleted everything," Hong said. Quietly. "When we moved. My mother made me delete everything."

"I know. I found nothing. For three years, I found nothing."

The cigarette was gone. Burned to the filter. Hong let it drop.

"I'm sorry," Hong said. "For not—for leaving without—"

"Don't." Nut's voice was soft. Firm. The combination that was uniquely Nut—gentle in texture, immovable in structure. "Don't apologize for something that was done to you."

Hong looked at him. The gray hair. The piercings. The eyeliner. The armor—all of it, the entire aesthetic arsenal that he had built in exile, the visual manifesto of rebellion and survival. And Nut looked at him. And Nut's eyes said what they had always said, what they had said on the stairwell and in the dorm room and through the earbud cable:

I see you. And I am not going anywhere.

The morning didn't arrive with the sunrise.

It arrived with the smell of strawberry shower gel and the incessant, rhythmic tapping of Lego's thumbs against a phone screen.

Hong groaned. The sound was deep, involuntary, the groan of a body that had consumed alcohol and consciousness in roughly equal measure the night before and was now being asked to reconcile the two. He tried to shift his position—to roll onto his side, to escape the light that was coming through Lego's high windows with the democratic, unapologetic insistence of a Bangkok noon—but Lego's weight prevented him.

Lego was draped across him like a colorful, indifferent cat.

Not asleep. Not cuddling—or rather, cuddling in the specific, unconscious, physically fluent way that Lego cuddled, which was less a deliberate act of affection and more a state of being, the way a vine grew on a wall, the way water filled a container—naturally, completely, without consulting the wall or the container about whether the arrangement was convenient.

Lego's head rested on Hong's chest, using his pectoral as a pillow, the weight of his skull pressing directly onto the muscle with the comfortable, settled pressure of a person who had been in this position for a while and had no plans to change it. Lego's hair was damp, cool against Hong's bare skin—freshly washed, the strands long and dark and spreading across Hong's chest like spilled ink. He was wearing a kitten-shaped headband for skincare—the kind of headband that was sold in Korean beauty stores and that served the dual purpose of holding hair back and making the wearer look like a small, domestic animal. A star-shaped acne patch was stuck to his forehead—lavender, translucent, the patch doing its quiet, cosmetic work on a blemish that was probably invisible to everyone except Lego, whose relationship with his skin was less vanity and more vigilance.

He smelled of strawberry shower gel—the scent sweet and chemical and bright, the scent that Hong secretly loved, the scent that had become, in the years of their friendship, the olfactory signature of Lego's apartment and Lego's presence and safety and home.

He wore a T-shirt that Hong recognized as his own—a black shirt, oversized on Lego's smaller frame, the hem falling to mid-thigh, the fabric soft from years of washing, the specific, worn-in softness of a garment that had been lived in. And thanks to the positioning—Lego draped diagonally, the T-shirt riding up, the legs bare—Hong could see his underwear. Black lace panties. Delicate. The lace intricate, the design feminine, the garment worn with the same unselfconscious confidence with which Lego wore everything: completely, without apology, without the performative awareness that the world might have an opinion about what he wore against his skin.

Hong, in contrast, was wearing yesterday's clothes. Just the pants. The silver chains from his belt were tangled in the sheets. His tank top was somewhere—probably on the floor, probably in the living room, probably draped over the aerial silks structure. His chest was bare, the skin marked by the creased imprint of whatever surface he had been pressed against during the night.

The phone tapped. Lego scrolled. Hong breathed.

"You're awake," Lego said, without looking up. His voice was bright—unreasonably bright for someone who had been at a party until the early hours of the morning. But Lego's brightness was constitutional rather than circumstantial, the default setting of a person whose energy was renewable and whose morning mood was independent of sleep quantity.

"I'm not awake," Hong said. His voice was a ruin—low, cracked, the voice of a person who had consumed mezcal and cigarettes and had screamed the lyrics to something at some point during the night. "I'm lying here and sound is happening near me. That's different from awake."

Lego looked down at him. The light-colored contact lenses were out—his eyes were warm brown, the natural color, the unadorned color, the color that very few people ever saw because Lego wore his lenses the way he wore his makeup and his nails and his piercings, as part of the daily construction of Lego, the public version, the performance.

The brown eyes were softer. Realer. The eyes of the person underneath the performance.

"Morning," Lego said. "Even though it's almost noon."

"It's not—" Hong started to protest, but his voice came out as a croak. He cleared his throat. The clearing felt like swallowing gravel. He tried again. "What time is it?"

"Eleven forty-seven. You were snoring."

"I don't snore," Hong said. The denial was automatic—reflex, muscle memory, the same denial he'd issued every time this accusation had been leveled, which was every time he'd slept in the presence of another human being.

"You snore." Lego's thumb kept scrolling. "You snore like something mechanical. Like a machine that processes air inefficiently."

"I don't snore. I breathe creatively."

"You breathe like a truck going uphill."

"That's the sound of aerobic capacity, Hoshi." Lego said, the nickname slipping out automatically, the Hoshi said with the casual, possessive tenderness of a person who had named someone and considered the name a permanent gift. "My lungs are trained for silks. They need extra air."

"Your lungs need a muffler."

"You both snore."

The voice came from the doorway. Tui. Standing in the frame—leaning against it, one shoulder against the wood, his body angled with the easy, comfortable posture of a person who had been standing there for a while and was enjoying the show. He was dressed—jeans, a T-shirt that might have been yesterday's or might have been today's, the wardrobe distinction irrelevant for a person who dressed for function. His hair was messy. His glasses were on—the reading glasses, balanced on his nose, suggesting that he had been doing something that required text before coming to observe the bedroom situation.

"You snore like a motorcycle," Tui said, nodding at Hong. "Lego snores like a kitten. It's a whole symphony when you two sleep in the same room."

"I don't snore," Lego said.

"Cutie, you absolutely snore."

"I make gentle breathing sounds."

"You make gentle breathing sounds that are also snoring."

"That's different."

"It is not different."

Lego still hadn't moved. His cheek was pressed more firmly against Hong's chest now, the weight settling in rather than lifting off, the body language of a person who was not going to move and who was not going to pretend that the reason was

anything other than what it was: comfort. Warmth. The physical proximity to a person she loved.

"You don't look uncomfortable," Hong observed, looking down at the top of Lego's head—the kitten headband, the damp hair, the acne patch. "For someone lying on top of a snoring motorcycle."

"I'm not uncomfortable." Lego's voice shifted—still light, still musical, but with an undertone that Hong recognized. The undertone that appeared when Lego was feeling something he didn't want to name. The brightness was still there, but beneath it, like the bass note beneath a melody, was something else. Something quieter. "It's been a while since you stayed over, Hoshi. I forgot what it was like."

The words landed with more weight than they should have. Hong felt them settle in his chest, somewhere near where Lego's head was resting, the words pressing against the same place, adding to the weight, the accumulation of small, honest sentences that Lego delivered without armor because Lego didn't believe in armor, because Lego's vulnerability was not a weakness but a practice.

Hong knew why it had been a while. He knew the logistics. Hong's new apartment was closer to downtown. Closer to the agency. Closer to the work that paid the bills and the gigs that filled the calendar and the life that was assembled, piece by piece, from the wreckage of Beijing and the hope of Bangkok.

"My new apartment is closer to downtown," Hong said. It was an explanation. It was also an excuse, and they both knew it. "It's easier to crash there after late shoots."

"I know." Lego's voice was quiet now, the brightness dimmed to a glow—still present, still warm, but at lower wattage. "It's just—you used to stay here every weekend. Remember? You and P'Nut would fight over the couch, and P'Tui would make breakfast, and we'd all just—be here. Together."

The memory assembled itself. Weekends. The penthouse loft with the aerial silks hanging from the beam and the polaroids on the wall and the boxes of unopened gifts by the door. The four of them—Hong, Nut, Tui, Lego—occupying the space the way a family occupied a house, the particular, unconscious choreography of people who knew where each other's bodies were at all times and moved around them instinctively.

Nut and Hong fighting over the good couch—the velvet one, the one closest to the TV, the one that was long enough for a tall person to stretch out on. The fight was never a fight. It was a ritual. A performance of domesticity that both of them enjoyed because the fighting was the point, the argument the medium through which affection was transmitted without being named.

Tui making breakfast—omelets, always omelets, the eggs folded with the precise, unhurried technique of a person who had taught himself vegetarian cooking not

from ideology but from the belief that nothing should be wasted, not time, not food, not the potential energy of a morning spent together.

Lego, cross-legged on the floor, doing his nails, the tiny bottles of polish lined up like soldiers, the concentration absolute, the tongue slightly out—the way Lego's tongue came out when he concentrated, the small, private tell that the people who knew him recognized and loved.

Together. Just—together. The word just doing all the work, carrying the entire weight of the sentiment, the just meaning nothing more was required, meaning the being here was the thing, meaning we didn't need a reason to be together because we were the reason.

"I miss you, Hoshi." Lego said. Simply. Without drama. Without the performative sadness that a lesser person might have deployed. Just the sentence. Offered. True. "When you're not here. Even when you snore."

Hong's hand moved. Without instruction from his brain—the hand operated independently, governed by the older, deeper programming that existed beneath the sarcasm and the armor and the flat voice. The hand found Lego's head. The fingers found the damp hair. The touch was gentle. The touch was the touch of a person who was not good at saying I love you and was using his hand to say it instead.

"I miss you too, Sweetheart," Hong said. The voice was quiet. The flatness—the defense mechanism, the vocal armor—was temporarily offline. The voice was just a voice. Warm. Honest. "Even when you steal my shirts."

Lego smiled against his chest. Hong felt the smile—the shape of it against his skin, the movement of the facial muscles beneath the pressed cheek. The smile said everything the words hadn't.

"You passed out around seven-thirty," Lego said, the brightness returning, the topic shifting with the practiced ease of a person who knew when a moment had been held long enough and when to release it before it became too heavy. "P'Nut carried you because you refused to walk."

"I don't remember that."

"You don't remember a lot of things." Lego's voice was light again, teasing, the tease delivered with the affectionate precision of a person who knew exactly which buttons to press and pressed them not to provoke but to connect. "You also told P'Nut his arms were—and I'm quoting here—architecturally significant."

"I did not say that."

"You did. P'Tui recorded it."

"I hate all of you."

"You love all of us. That's why you said his arms were architecturally significant."

Lego sat up. Cross-legged. The cat-ear headband slightly askew, tilting to the left, making him look like a very fashionable, very small, very sleepy animal. Hong's stolen T-shirt pooled around him. The lace panties were visible, and Lego didn't adjust the shirt, didn't cover them, because Lego didn't cover things. Lego existed openly, every layer visible, every choice on display—the panties and the acne patch and the headband and the stolen shirt and the long, dark hair and the rings still on his fingers because Lego had been too tired to remove them last night.

He stretched. The stretch was full-body—arms up, spine arching, the specific, indulgent stretch of a person who lived in their body the way an aerialist lived in their body, fully, completely, every joint and muscle acknowledged and engaged. Something in his spine popped. He sighed—the sigh of satisfaction, the audible, physical relief of a body realigning.

"Okay," he said. "I need tea."

Tui's voice interrupted from the kitchen. Not the doorway anymore—the kitchen, meaning he had migrated during the conversation, meaning that Tui was already doing what Tui always did: taking care of things before anyone asked him to.

"Come on, it's noon. Let's have breakfast."

In the kitchen, Tui had cooked like the old days.

The kitchen was Lego's—high-end, enormous, the kitchen of a penthouse loft in a luxury Thonglor high-rise—but it was functionally Tui's, the space claimed not through ownership but through competence. Tui knew where everything was. Tui knew which burner ran hot and which spatula was the good one and where Lego kept the green tea (top shelf, left cabinet, behind the unopened box of an artisan tea set that Lego's mother had sent and that Lego hadn't opened because the tea he liked was the cheap kind from 7-Eleven).

The counter was laid out. Fruit—mango, papaya, dragonfruit—cut and arranged with the precise, unpretentious artistry of a person who cared about food as an experience rather than an obligation. An omelet—Tui's signature, folded, golden, the eggs mixed with whatever vegetables he'd found in Lego's fridge, which was probably not much, which was probably why the omelet was largely mushroom and spring onion. Coffee—brewed, strong, the kind of coffee that Nut would have made if Nut were here, the kind that was more caffeine delivery system than beverage. And for Lego, a separate plate: fruit, cut smaller, the pieces manageable, the portions careful, and green tea—iced, unsweetened, made with the specific attention of a person who knew that Lego's eating patterns were irregular and sometimes concerning and who addressed the concern not with confrontation but

with quiet, consistent provisioning.

"Nut's gone?" Hong asked, shuffling into the kitchen. His bare feet on the tile—the tile cold, expensive, the kind of tile that a mansion-raised person installed because they'd grown up on tile and didn't know that floors could be warm. His silver chains swung with each step, the sound metallic and rhythmic, the sound of Hong moving through a space.

"Gone to work," Tui said without turning around. He was at the stove—plating, the movements efficient, the body at home in this kitchen the way it was at home on rooftops and in darkrooms. "Left around nine. He said to tell you—and I'm quoting—if you don't eat breakfast, I will find you and I will feed you myself."

"That's a threat, not a message."

"With Nut, those are the same thing."

Hong sat at the counter. Lego sat beside him—cross-legged on the high stool, the platform boots abandoned somewhere, his bare feet tucked under him, the kitten headband still on because Lego hadn't done his skincare yet and the headband was functional, not decorative. He reached for the green tea. Took a sip. Bit a piece of ice. The crunch was audible, specific, the sound of Lego's most consistent habit.

Hong looked at his cell phone, which was connected to the charger in the Lego luxury kitchen—Lego's charger, Lego's cable, plugged in by someone, probably Nut, probably at the same time as the carrying and the architecturally significant arms.

The screen was a crime scene.

MISSED CALLS: P'Kwan (Manager) - (24)

Twenty-four. Two-four. The number was not a mistake. The number was a statement—the numerical equivalent of a woman standing outside a building and screaming a name at increasing volume for several hours.

TEXT: "HONG. ANSWER YOUR PHONE NOW."

TEXT: "WHERE IS EST?"

TEXT: "THIS IS NOT A JOKE."

TEXT: "CALL ME BACK IMMEDIATELY."

TEXT: "HONG I SWEAR TO GOD"

The texts escalated in the specific, predictable trajectory of a manager who had lost track of two models at a corporate event and was processing the loss through the five stages of professional grief: denial, anger, more anger, significantly more anger, and resignation.

Then—the final message. Timestamped 8:47 AM. Hours after the others:

P'KWAN (MANAGER): "Est is fine. He just texted his manager. But we still need to talk about last night. Call me."

Hong read the message. Read it again. Felt something in his chest—the tension he hadn't realized he'd been holding, the tension that had been there since the party, since the Dirty Martinis, since the moment he'd watched Est disappear into the night with William and had thought either I just did something very good or very stupid—finally begin to release.

Est was fine.

He sighed. The sigh was long, deep, the exhale carrying more than air—carrying the specific, accumulated anxiety of a person who knew that his manager hated him, who knew that Kwan had expected a model like Est and instead received Hong, who knew that every decision he made was measured against the standard of what would a normal, well-behaved, contract-compliant model have done and found wanting.

"How bad is it?" Tui asked, placing the omelet in front of Hong.

Hong held up the phone. The screen faced Tui. Tui read the messages. His expression didn't change—the expression of a man who had been reading Hong's manager's angry texts for years and had developed an immunity.

"Twenty-four missed calls," Tui said. "That's actually an improvement. Last time it was thirty-one."

"Last time I didn't lose a client's top model."

"You didn't lose him. He's not a wallet."

"Tell that to Kwan." Hong put the phone down. Picked up the coffee. The coffee was hot, strong, the bitterness a counterweight to the residual sweetness of Lego's strawberry-scented apartment. "She already thinks I'm the agency's black sheep. Now I've taken their golden boy to a warehouse party and he disappeared with someone."

"He disappeared with William," Tui said. The distinction was important. Tui made it the way he made all his distinctions—calmly, precisely, with the quiet authority of a person who observed everything and forgot nothing. "He didn't disappear into a void. He left with someone we know and trust."

"Kwan doesn't know William. Kwan doesn't know any of you. Kwan knows that her model went to a corporate event and never came home and the last person he was seen with was me, the agency's resident liability."

"You're not a liability, Hoshi." Lego's voice. Still bright, still light, but with the firm undertone of a person who did not accept the premise. He was eating ice. The crunch punctuated the sentence. "You're the only real person at that agency."

"Being real doesn't pay rent."

"Being fake doesn't either. Not forever. Not the way they do it." Lego bit another piece of ice. "That agency needs to stop acting like you're the black sheep just because you're the only one who doesn't follow their script."

"The script is what keeps the agency running, Sweetheart."

"The script is boring, Hoshi. You're not boring. That's why they don't know what to do with you." Lego looked at him—the brown eyes, the real ones, the eyes without the contacts. The gaze was steady, the gaze of a person who had built an entire career on being looked at and who, in private, used looking as a form of love. "The script says be polite, be agreeable, be the product. You're not a product. You're a person. And Est—from what you told us last night—Est is also a person who's been treated like a product for a very long time."

The observation landed. It landed in the place where Lego's observations always landed—the place that Hong kept defended, the place that the sarcasm protected, the soft center behind the armor. Lego found it every time. Lego found it because Lego's form of intelligence was not analytical but emotional, not logical but intuitive, the specific, body-level knowledge of a person who read people through touch and proximity and the subtle vibrations of mood.

Hong ate the omelet. It was good. Tui's omelets were always good—the specific, reliable goodness of food made by a person who cooked not for applause but for the people sitting at the table.

"He was a person last night," Hong said. Quietly. Not looking up from the omelet. The words came out the way his brother's words had come through the wall—arriving without plan, driven by pressure. "For the first time since I met him, he was a person and not a product."

The kitchen was quiet.

"At the company party, he was—you know what he was. You've seen the campaigns. The turtleneck, the jawline, the look. Perfect. Controlled. The model's model. And then I brought him to the warehouse and he—" Hong paused. Searching. "He sat by the fire. He smoked a cigarette. He talked to William about—about scent, and photography, and the way certain images carry weight. He laughed. He ate ice because Lego told him to. He was there. Not performing. Not curating. Just—there."

"He's his own adult," Tui said. He said it the way he said everything important—once, clearly, without repetition, the sentence a nail driven with a single, clean

stroke. "He made a choice to come with you. He made a choice to stay. He made a choice to enjoy himself. Those were his choices. Not yours."

"If Est wants to walk out of a party, he walks out," Tui continued, turning back to the stove, the spatula moving again. "You're not his kidnapper. You're his wake-up call."

"Tell that to Kwan." Hong held up the phone again. The screen glowed with the accumulated urgency of twenty-four missed calls.

"Gladly," Tui said. "Give me her number."

"Please don't call my manager."

"Then stop acting like you committed a crime. The only crime committed last night was Lego eating the garnish at the cheese station."

"It was edible garnish," Lego said. "It was a microgreen. Microgreens are food."

"Microgreens are decoration."

"Decoration can be food. Everything can be food if you're brave enough."

Hong almost smiled. The almost-smile was the Hong equivalent of a standing ovation—the maximum expression of amusement that his morning face was willing to produce.

"If Est got into trouble—if something happened to him because I took him to that party—"

"What would have happened to him?" Tui asked. The question was not rhetorical. Tui's questions were never rhetorical—they were structural, designed to support the argument by making the other person build it.

"He could have—"

"He was surrounded by people all night. He was with William when he left. He's a grown man who made a grown decision."

"He was drunk." Hong said. The word—drunk—carried weight. Not judgment. Concern. The concern of a person who understood what it meant to be impaired and to make decisions while impaired and to wake up the next morning and find those decisions waiting for you, solid and permanent, in the daylight.

Lego looked at Tui. Tui looked at Lego. The look was brief, a communication conducted in the private language of two people who had been a group for years and who could exchange entire paragraphs in a glance.

"You think William took care of him?" Hong asked.

"I know he did." Tui took a bite of his omelet. Chewed. Swallowed. The certainty in his voice was not hope—it was knowledge, the knowledge of a person who had observed William closely and consistently and who understood, with the precision of a photographer who had studied his subject for years, exactly what kind of person William was. "William's careful, Hong. More careful than anyone I know. He wouldn't have let anything happen to Est. Not anything Est didn't want to happen."

"So you're saying they—"

"I'm saying that two adults made a choice to spend time together." Tui's voice was firm. Not hard—Tui was incapable of hardness—but firm, the firmness of a foundation, the firmness that held things up. "And whatever happened, it was their choice. You didn't force them. You didn't trick them. You showed Est a party full of real people and he chose to connect with one of them. That's not your fault. That's you doing a good thing."

"A good thing that might cost both of us our contracts."

"Would that be the worst outcome?"

The question hung in the air of Lego's luxury kitchen—suspended, turning slowly, the question of a person who understood that contracts were temporary but people were permanent, that agencies were structures but friendships were foundations, that the script was boring but the life outside it was not.

Hong stared at the omelet. The omelet stared back. The omelet had no answers.

"Yes," Hong said. Then: "No." Then: "I don't know."

Lego reached over. His hand—small, the nails from last night still on, the black polish slightly chipped at the edges from sleep and movement—found Hong's forearm. The touch was light but specific, the touch of a person who used physical contact to read and communicate simultaneously. Lego's fingers pressed gently against Hong's skin, and Hong felt the pressure as a sentence: I am here. We are here. Whatever happens, the contracts and the managers and the scripts are not the real thing. We are the real thing.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Hoshi," Lego said. "You did what you always do. You looked at someone who needed to be seen and you saw them. That's not a crime. That's the only good thing about you."

"The only good thing?"

"Well. That and the snoring. It's very reliable. Like a white noise machine."

Hong reached for an edamame shell and threw it at him. Lego ducked. The shell hit the wall behind him and fell onto the tile.

Tui looked at the shell on the floor. Looked at Hong. Looked at Lego.

"I'll clean that up," Tui said. "Because I always clean everything up. Because that is my role in this family."

"You love your role." Lego said.

"I do." Tui said. And the I do was warm—the warmth of a person who had found his people and his purpose and who would not trade either for anything, not for a contract, not for a script, not for any version of life that did not include this kitchen and these people and this morning.

Hong picked up his phone. Looked at the screen. Twenty-four missed calls. The texts. The anger. The machinery of professional consequence grinding toward him.

He put the phone down.

He ate the omelet.

The omelet was good.